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## British Industrial Relations Pluralism in the Era of Neo-Liberalism

### Introduction

Pluralist perspectives were once unequivocally dominant in the analysis of work and employment relations in the UK and pluralism remains the chosen frame of reference for most scholars within the academic field of Industrial Relations. This dominant position has been challenged by the rise to prominence of unitary and neo-liberal writing, however, and pluralist scholarship has had to adapt to a series of potent challenges over the past three decades. The classic pluralism of many of the founders of IR as an academic field in the UK has been replaced by newer versions better suited to an era when neo-liberalism holds sway, not just in the realm of ideas but in much labour market policy as well. In this article, this transition from classic pluralism to a pluralism for the era of neo-liberalism is described and analysed, focusing primarily though not exclusively on developments in Britain.

Classic IR pluralism quintessentially was an intellectual response to the rise of the industrial working class and was concerned with the development of institutions that could integrate workers into stable, developed societies (Kaufman 2004). In the political sphere these institutions comprised liberal democracy, the welfare state, and social democratic political parties, while in the industrial sphere they consisted of trade unions and systems of collective bargaining. The central preoccupation was the problem of order, of finding means to integrate workers into functioning capitalist economies on the basis of a societal exchange in which workers received improved conditions and a degree of industrial citizenship in return for acceptance of the prevailing social order.

Contemporary pluralist writing continues to be preoccupied with the problem of order. The problems of order that concern contemporary pluralists, however, tend to be of a different kind to those that exercised their classic predecessors. They are concerned with disorderly markets rather than disorderly workers and propose regulatory solutions to perceived market failures. The latter include rising income inequality, low pay, ballooning executive pay, the growth of precarious work, failings of training and skill formation, and the entrenchment of a low-cost, low productivity dynamic, particularly in the ~~UK and other~~ Anglophone economies. There are echoes of older concerns in contemporary pluralism. Thus, Standing (2011) has identified the precariat as a ‘new dangerous class’ and has urged its integration through widespread labour market reform. The prime focus, however, has been a critique of neo-liberalism and attempts to defend (and where possible extend) systems of labour market regulation from ~~its~~ neo-liberalism’s corrosive force. As a consequence, pluralist writing in Britain has assumed a more critical hue and new zones of contention have emerged between pluralist and unitary and neo-liberal perspectives on work.

For the purpose of this article, pluralism is defined as a ‘frame of reference’, in the manner of Fox (1974); that is, a set of assumptions about the nature of the employment relationship and the interests embedded within it that informs both empirical inquiry and normative judgement and prescription (see also Budd and Bhavie 2008). The pluralist frame can be counter-posed to other scholarly traditions of writing about work that rest on very different assumptions about the nature of the employment relationship. Thus, critical writing tends to assume that the interests of workers and employers are sharply opposed and regards the employment relationship as exploitative, dehumanising and conflicted, repeatedly generating worker resistance of both an organized and unorganized kind. Unitary writing, in contrast, assumes that the interests of workers and employers can be fully aligned through human resource practices that configure high performance job roles, which are intrinsically

satisfying, developmental and rewarding. A harder, neo-liberal version of this argument holds that congruence of interests occurs through the provision of market and other financial incentives to workers, which can overcome the propensity to shirk and prompt ready cooperation with employers. The pluralist tradition stands between these other frames and, as we shall see, has interacted with them in a number of ways through time, offering sharp critique on occasion while at other times occupying shared ground.

In analysing the contemporary expression of pluralism the article will have regard to six key features: 1) the conception of the relative interests of workers and employers that underpins pluralist scholarship; 2) the research agenda that flows from this understanding of interests; 3) the types of explanation favoured by contemporary pluralism; 4) the standards that pluralists habitually use when assessing the employment relationship; 5) the targets of critique within pluralist analysis; 6) the favoured prescriptions of pluralist writers for the reform of industrial relations. Throughout, the aim will be to identify key points of transition: to map how pluralist scholarship has adjusted to the neo-liberal challenge.

## **Interests**

How then do pluralists conceive of the relative interests of workers and employers? The defining feature of IR pluralism, both contemporary and classic, is a belief that workers and employers have opposing interests within a relationship of mutual dependence. To employ the terms used by Budd (2004) in his major restatement of the pluralist perspective, workers have an interest in both ‘equity’ and ‘voice’ at work, which can lead to both distributional conflict and conflict over the exercise of management prerogative with their employers. However, workers also have an interest in ‘efficiency’, in the effective and sustained operation of the employing enterprise, which can provide the basis of a ‘productivity coalition’, an alliance with employers to raise business performance. Because of this mutual

dependence, moreover, there is always scope, according to pluralists, to resolve the disputes which inevitably emerge from conflicting interests. The shared interest of both sides in the continuance of their relationship provides an impulse to negotiate and seek resolution when open conflict breaks out. For pluralists, as Budd and his colleagues (2004) aver, a ‘balance is best’.

It is also axiomatic for pluralists that there is an imbalance of power as well as a clash of interests at the heart of the employment relationship. Workers stand in a position of structured disadvantage in relation to their employers and consequently require both collective organization and the shield of regulation to protect their distinct and opposed interests. For pluralists, the combination of conflicting interests and an imbalance of power create a functional imperative for both worker representation and the regulation of management decision-making within the employment relationship.

The final axiom that completes the pluralist understanding of interests is that representation and regulation of the employment relationship can serve the interests of employers as much as workers, especially in the longer term and from the perspective of employers as a class. In the absence of either, negative outcomes will ensue for all parties to the employment relationship. If workers lack voice through collective representation then authoritarian management will elicit resistance and sub-optimal performance. Equally if management decision-making is not regulated by law or collective agreements then it will follow an opportunist course, eliminating cost at the expense of longer-term growth. Streeck’s (1997) argument that regulation can function as a ‘beneficial constraint’, requiring managers to manage well, is an exemplary statement of this point of view. It embodies the belief that regulation can extend the zone of shared interests within the employment relationship, requiring the stronger party to form a productivity coalition with the weaker.

While these core assumptions about the relative interests of workers and employers underpin both classic and contemporary pluralism, there is one distinctive feature of the contemporary understanding of interests that was almost wholly absent from the former. This feature is the recognition that women and minority workers have distinctive interests that are in certain respects opposed to those of male and majority workers and which cannot be subsumed in the broader category of worker interests. There is belated acceptance in pluralist, and indeed critical and unitary, IR scholarship that the employment relationship is gendered and incorporates interests grounded in a range of identities (Healy et al. 2006). The hallmark of pluralist acceptance, however, has been to apply classic features of pluralist argument to the case of women's and minority interests: to assert that effective forms of representation are required to advance these interests against those both of employers and male and majority workers and to claim that effective regulation is similarly required in the form of strong equality law (Dickens 2005). It is further claimed that protective regulation and the representation of minority interests can promote the collective and longer-term interests of employers through the upgrading of HR practice; that there is a 'business case' for equality institutions (Dickens 1999). There has been a distinctive pluralist current in the wider engagement of IR researchers with questions of equality and diversity.

## **Research Agenda**

Pluralist IR scholarship has generated a colossal amount of research ~~over the decades~~. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify broad themes in the pluralist research tradition, which emerged in the classical period and that continue to be developed, but in transmuted form today. In what follows, these themes are identified and illustrated with a particular stress on their recent development in the United Kingdom.

As we have noted, the first theme within the pluralist research tradition has been the problem of order or the ‘labour problem’ as it was once widely known (Kaufman 2004: 34). Pluralists have identified, analysed, measured, and explained pressing work-related problems that can and should be addressed by appropriate forms of regulation. In the classical period of UK pluralist scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s these problems were associated with a stronger, more assertive labour movement and included, unofficial strikes, job controls, shop stewards, inflation, and low productivity. The research agenda of present-day pluralists continues to be marked by problem-solving but there has been a switch from examining problems *of* labour to problems *for* labour. The latter, as has been suggested, are viewed as the product of ‘disorderly’ markets, released from regulation, coupled with untrammelled management prerogative in a period of employer ascendancy. A major concern of contemporary pluralist scholarship is the seeming decline in the quality of jobs, which can be seen in research on low pay, poverty, work intensification, work-life balance, and precarious work (Brady et al. 2013; ~~Green 2006;~~ Green and Whitfield 2009; Lloyd et al. 2008). Another concern is inequality and the redistribution of income from those in the lower reaches of the income distribution to those at the top, a process that is occurring both within and between occupations (Machin 2011; ~~Osterman and Shulman 2011;~~ Turnbull and Wass 2011). For pluralists writing from a diversity perspective there has been a particular concern to identify the penalties of declining job quality and rising income inequality for women and minority workers (Greene 2015). The emphasis on exposing labour market failure and injustice has lent a critical tone to much contemporary pluralist writing and, indeed, has blurred the boundary between pluralist scholarship and that of critical writers further to the left.

A second theme in pluralist research arises from the conviction that workers have an interest in voice. Research on voice and the institutions through which it is expressed has been perennial within the pluralist tradition. In classic pluralism this led to an almost



exclusive research focus on trade unionism and the primary method through which unions have provided representation, collective bargaining (Kaufman 2010:818). Unions continue to be a prime focus of pluralist scholarship today and for most pluralists the revitalization of the trade union movement remains a desirable goal. This, in turn, has led to two types of research. On the one hand, pluralist scholars have mounted a defence of trade unionism, seeking to demonstrate that unions not only advance the substantive interests of workers but can also contribute to economic performance (Bryson and Forth 2011). A strand within this research has drawn particular attention to the positive effect of unions on the earnings and conditions of employment of women and minorities (Metcalf 2005). On the other hand, pluralists have studied union attempts at revitalization and, in particular, have examined partnership agreements negotiated with individual employers. In the UK, pluralist researchers have mapped the incidence of partnership and produced case studies that have explored the origins of these agreements and identified costs and benefits to workers, unions themselves, and to employers (Bacon and Samuel 2009; Oxenbridge and Brown 2005).

Pluralist research on partnership has on occasion identified particular benefits for women and minority workers, such as increases in the proportion of women trade union representatives and the extension of union influence to issues such as family-friendly working (Samuel 2014; Johnstone 2015). The main focus of pluralist researchers interested in equality, however, has been directed elsewhere. For these researchers, union revitalization is dependent on the repositioning of unions as representative agents for women and minority interests. Accordingly, there has been a research focus on gender democracy and other reforms of union government to allow for the expression of these interests in union decision-making and upon bargaining and other union interventions that promote workplace equality (Greene 2015; Heery and Conley 2007). While mainstream pluralist attention has been directed at partnership, an institution designed to reconstitute union relations with employers,



pluralists focused on the issue of equality have prioritized the wider reform of unions to reconstitute relations between male and female and majority and minority trade unionists.

Another feature of contemporary pluralism has been the extension of research on voice beyond unions to examine other representative institutions. Perhaps the main thrust in pluralist work on non-union representation has been towards statutory-based participation, such as works councils. In the UK this research has been driven largely by European legislative developments, such as the European Works Council directive and the directive on information and consultation in national-scale undertakings. In precisely the manner of work on trade unions, pluralist researchers have mapped the incidence of statutory participation and carried out case studies of its operation and effects (~~Hall et al. 2010~~; Hall and Purcell 2011). Running alongside this work has been research on employer-sponsored forms of voice, such as participation through committees, forums, and councils. Much of this research is positive in tone, identifying benefits for workers in these schemes (Johnstone et al. 2010); a notable contrast with the sceptical assessment of non-union voice that was dominant in the classical pluralist literature (Ackers 2007). The final and most recent development in pluralist work on non-union representation has been research on single issue and identity-based organizations that seek to influence the employment relationship through legislative change or direct pressure on employers. For all of these non-union institutions, pluralists have examined the relationship with trade unions and frequently have identified scope for joint working (Heery 2011). There is often espousal of hybrid forms of representation as the most effective means of advancing the worker interests.

The final theme in the pluralist research agenda has been the assessment of regulatory institutions and attempts at reform intended to produce a fresh balance of interests between workers and employers. Pluralists have consistently viewed regulation, including joint regulation, as the solution to the problem of order and the typical pluralist research study has

been an evaluation of a particular regulatory institution or episode of reform. The assessment of regulatory institutions and reform initiatives continues to be at the centre of pluralist analysis today and collective bargaining, including ‘equality bargaining’, remains an abiding interest. In addition to the work on labour-management partnership mentioned above, contemporary pluralists in Britain have assessed the statutory union recognition procedure introduced by the Labour Government in 1999 (~~Brown et al. 2001;~~ Oxenbridge et al. 2003). The main conclusion though is that this was an ineffective reform and most recent research on collective bargaining has concluded that it is in decline and, where it survives, has often transmuted into a weaker form of joint regulation, joint consultation (Brown and Nash 2008). Beyond joint regulation, there has also been a major emphasis on statutory regulation, in research that has assessed both domestically authored employment law, such as the UK’s National Minimum Wage, and the expanding body of law that originates in the European Union. There is now voluminous research from a broadly pluralist perspective on European regulation of UK workplaces, much of it positive in its assessment (~~Gold 2009;~~ Hobbs and Njoya 2005). The same is true of the National Minimum Wage perhaps the single most intensively researched labour market reform of recent years. For pluralists, this has been an archetypal regulatory reform, improving material conditions for those at the base of the labour market, especially part-time women and members of ethnic minorities, and reducing inequality with minimal cost to the economy (Manning 2011). There is also growing pluralist interest in forms of regulation beyond the law. Private forms of regulation developed by civil society organizations to guide management treatment of minority workers, occupational licensing, and the codes of practice giant firms themselves devise to regulate labour management along their supply chains are among the regulatory institutions that currently are attracting attention from pluralist researchers (Fernie 2011; Locke et al. 2013; Williams et al. 2011). As collective bargaining has declined and other modes of regulation have come to the

fore, so pluralists have ‘followed the work’ and weighed each new institution, each fresh reform in the balance.

## **Explanation**

In classic pluralism, a system of trade-union based industrial relations tended to be regarded as a natural precipitation of a mature industrial society, a view expressed most powerfully by Clark Kerr and his co-authors in *Industrialism and Industrial Man* (Kaufman 2004: 259). This type of understanding of the macro-context of IR continues to feature within the pluralist canon. In its essentials, it contains three core propositions. The first is that the system of IR marches in step with and forms an essential component of a broad stage of economic development, an argument that change takes the form of progression through a series of epochs. The second is that change is driven from the economic base with new forms of production and associated changes in the structure of markets calling forth institutional responses in the realm of IR. And the third is the claim that these causal factors operate across all developed economies thereby generating common forms of institutional response within individual nation states, what has been known since Kerr’s time as the ‘convergence thesis’.

These three claims are encountered repeatedly in contemporary pluralist argument. It remains common to characterize the context of IR in terms of a broad stage of economic development though today’s pluralists emphasize the selective pressures from an era of post-industrialism (~~Herzenberg et al. 1998~~) or employ the categories developed by regulation theory, claiming that contemporary IR is shaped by a transition from Fordism to post-Fordism (Howell 2005)–(~~Howell 2005~~). There is also a frequent emphasis on economic causation, with changes in IR being driven by the spread of more flexible systems of production, the globalization of product markets, or a shift in the basis of competition within

markets from cost-leadership to innovation and quality (Brown 2008; Kochan et al. 2009). Finally, convergence arguments continue to be presented, though today's pluralists are more likely to perceive this as a threatening process involving a levelling down of employment standards, a race to the bottom. The forces of convergence have variously been identified as globalization, financialization, and the diffusion of neo-liberal policy-making across nation states, processes that disorder existing forms of IR and create a need for new forms of pluralist regulation (Howell and Kolins Givan 2011).

This set of assumptions about the context in which the IR system functions has led, in turn, to a series of middle-range theoretical claims about the relationship between the current stage of economic development and IR institutions. One such claim relates to the concern of pluralist scholars to mount a defence of trade unionism and collective bargaining. It has been argued that these traditional IR institutions are not just compatible with new flexible, forms of production but can ensure the latter operate to their full potential. Thus, pluralist researchers examining high performance work systems have taken pains to demonstrate their effective functioning in unionized workplaces and have argued that union presence can help embed these new work practices and ensure they are sustained over the longer term (~~Appelbaum and Batt 1994: 127;~~ Frost 2000). Another claim relates to the impact of new forms of work organization and more competitive product markets on trade union form and function. The pluralist literature on partnership has suggested that unions are impelled to form a 'productivity coalition' with employers under the more intense competitive pressures attendant on globalization, while flexible or post-Fordist forms of production furnish a basis for cooperative work relations (Brown 2008; Kochan et al. 2009). A rather different argument has been made by Cobble (1991) and others (~~Herzenberg et al. 1998~~) who argue that a defining feature of post-industrialism is the emergence of a more market-based system of employment relations, characterized by the erosion of internal labour markets, the growth of

sub-contracting, and the spread of contingent or precarious forms of employment contract. To perform their representative function effectively in this altered context, it is argued that unions need to operate beyond the enterprise by campaigning for minimum standards, re-establishing multi-employer bargaining to take wages out of competition, and providing labour market services, such as training and job placement, to mobile and often vulnerable workers.

Arguments of this kind relate to the debate over union revitalization and claim, in essence, that a new phase of economic development is imposing selective pressure on unions to ~~adapt and~~ evolve new forms of representation. A third type of pluralist claim is more ~~radical~~ far-reaching in its conclusions and avers that new forms of worker representation and new modes of regulation are required for a new epoch. Thus, Piore and Safford (2006) have argued that fundamental shifts in economy and society have irretrievably undermined union-based forms of IR and in their place an ‘employment rights regime’ has emerged that provides effective regulation of the labour market through an ever-expanding volume of statutory rights and case law, mediated through formal systems of human resource management. The principal architects of this expanded body of legal and associated management regulation, moreover, are not trade unions but the new social movements grounded in gender, race, age, disability, sexual orientation, and faith, new actors in industrial relations which campaign for legal regulation and monitor its implementation at workplace level (see also Ackers 2002). For this neo-pluralist argument, change in the institutions of industrial relations has been driven by a fundamental ‘shift in the axes of social mobilization’.

While stage-of-development arguments remain very influential within the pluralist tradition, they are not the only way in which the macro IR-context has been theorized and there is a second, equally influential body of work that stresses the role of formal national

institutions in shaping IR processes and outcomes. Again, this type of argument was developed in the classical pluralist canon. A particularly clear example can be found in Clegg's *Trade Unionism under Collective Bargaining* (1976), which uses comparative data from six countries to demonstrate that union behaviour is highly variable and can be explained by differences in the structure of collective bargaining across countries. Arguments of this type continue to feature in pluralist writing today, frequently drawing upon the varieties of capitalism school to develop a new wave of institutional explanation. What is perhaps most notable about the latter is that it casts its net much wider in identifying those institutions that shape IR processes and outcomes. Whereas Clegg focused on the structure of collective bargaining, a core component of the traditional system of IR, modern-day pluralists ascribe causal effects to central banks, new forms of business ownership, the system of corporate governance, and the wider business system or variety of capitalism that is inscribed in the nation's political economy (e.g. Bacon et al. 2004; Gospel and Pendleton 2010; Iverson et al. 2000). In this contemporary expression of institutional argument one can see the dissolution of the old notion of a discrete, relatively self-contained industrial relations system, once a master-concept within pluralist theory. It is the connectedness of the employment sphere to other institutional fields that now holds sway.

### ***Agency***

Another type of explanation identifies those whose agency shapes the employment relationship and seeks to comprehend and establish the effects of deliberate, agentic action. Unsurprisingly, there is a current in pluralist research that ascribes significant agency to trade unions. As we have seen, pro-union pluralists have measured trade union effects on wages and other indicators of worker well-being. They have also formulated typologies of union strategy, with recent versions tending to denote partnership with employers as the most attractive of the strategic options available to unions (Boxall and Haynes 1997). Unlike much

critical writing on trade unions, which locates the source of agency in the rank-and-file base, pluralists have tended to point to national leaders and other professional representatives within trade unions as the key strategic actors (e.g. Heery and Conley 2007). Union strategy flows from above in this current of work and is not pushed forward from below.

While unions have been identified as strategic actors in pluralist work, this is not always the case and there is a contrary trend that has tended to emphasize the over-determination of union behaviour and the limited scope for manoeuvre of worker representatives. This scepticism about the agency of trade unions continues to be visible in modern-day pluralism. Unions are presented rather as hapless victims of forces beyond their control and there is a pronounced scepticism as to the effectiveness of union recruitment and organizing activity, such a prominent feature of recent attempts at union revitalization (~~Charlwood 2004~~; Gospel 2005; Johnstone 2015; Metcalf 2005). Claims about the capacity of unions to renew themselves, typically through militant and mobilizing strategies that eschew partnership, are recurrent on the critical wing of IR, and pluralists with equal recurrency have expressed doubts about the effectiveness of these strategies.

A similar ambivalence about the capacity for agency is seen in pluralist work on employers. Pluralists have often used the concept of 'strategic choice' to interpret the actions of employers and in some formulations employers are identified as the critical actor shaping the system of IR. Pluralists have also proposed typologies of management strategy or style that are analogous to those developed in the strategic HRM literature. However, pluralists have tended to present employers as deeply fallible and are much less likely than scholars in the unitary tradition to assume that strategies are implemented or are effective. In the classic pluralist literature weaknesses of management were often seen as a source of disorder within workplace industrial relations (Brown 1973) and when pluralist researchers came to apply their typologies of strategy to empirical evidence they found often that management action



lacked coherence or strategic intent (Marginson and Sisson 1988: 116-22). Partly for this reason, pluralists have tended to have limited confidence in the ability of employers to reform IR. The scepticism of pluralist writers on equality about the scope and scale of voluntary employer action to improve the conditions of women and minorities, driven by the ‘business case’, is a case in point (Greene 2009). For pluralists, employers need to be constrained and subject to beneficial constraints that will guide their action towards mutual gains for workers and themselves (Dickens 1999). Ultimately, there must be regulation of employer behaviour and the source of this regulation and the principal strategic actor for most pluralist commentators is the state.

Even with regard to the state and its agencies, however, pluralists have evinced scepticism about the capacity for strategic action. This scepticism reflects the broader diagnosis that British IR was traditionally voluntarist, based on free collective bargaining between unions and employers with state intervention assuming an auxiliary role. More recent pluralist writing, however, is explicit in attaching primary causal powers to the agency of the state. Howell’s (2005) alternative history of British IR, for example, identifies state policy as the central force that has driven change, equally in the period of voluntarism as in the phase of neo-liberal reconstruction since 1980. For Howell and Kolins Givan (2011: 251) ‘no theory of institutional change that downplays the importance of state action will be adequate to the task of explaining industrial relations developments in the contemporary period’. The positive assessment by pluralists of recent state reforms, such as the British National Minimum Wage (Brown 2011; Metcalf 2008), points in the same direction, to an acceptance of the strategic capacity of the state and its potential to intervene effectively to balance worker and employer interests. In the pluralist canon, neither workers and their organizations nor employers are denied agency but increasingly it is the state that is believed to have primacy with regard to causal effect.

## Evaluation

The principal criterion for assessing the system of IR developed within classical pluralism was success in regulating industrial conflict and integrating organized workers into the social and political order. The function of IR was to channel conflict into forms of expression that posed little threat to the operation of the economy and to provide a means of settling disputes through negotiation and compromise, by balancing interests. The preoccupation of British pluralists in the 1960s with unofficial and unconstitutional strikes and how institutions might be reformed to eradicate them provides an example (Turner et al. 1967). Research on strikes is now at an historic low-ebb and in a period of labour quiescence this criterion of evaluation seemingly has less relevance. But pluralists continue to assess IR institutions and reforms in terms of their success in regulating conflict. In the UK there is now much greater concern with individual than collective expressions of conflict with researchers evaluating company procedures, alternative methods of dispute resolution, the Employment Tribunal system, and the activities of the Advisory, Arbitration and Conciliation Service (~~Aeas~~) in terms of their success in resolving individual employment disputes (e.g. Dix et al. 2009; Hayward et al. 2004; Latreille et al. 2012). In classic fashion, the operation of the system of employment law has been designated by policy makers as an IR problem – an ‘excessive’ number of cases are believed to impose a burden on both employers and the public purse – and researchers have explored the conditions that give rise to conflict and assessed different options for reform.

Use of a second criterion of evaluation by contemporary pluralists can be seen in the large volume of work that mounts a performance-based defence of trade unionism, ~~collective bargaining~~, and other balancing institutions. If the latter are believed to impose ‘beneficial constraints’ on employers then it is imperative to provide empirical demonstration that their long-term impact is benign. ~~The use of a business performance criterion for evaluating pluralist IR institutions began in earnest with the publication of *What do Unions Do?*~~

~~(Freeman and Medoff 1984), which attempted to demonstrate a positive union effect on labour productivity. Since then, In recent years,~~ the use of quantitative methods to measure the positive effects on business of unions and other representative and regulatory institutions has become routine within the pluralist tradition (Proctor and Rawlinson 2012). Once again, the UK's NMW can provide an example, with researchers seeking either to tease out its positive impact on performance or at least demonstrate that negative consequences are absent (Metcalf 2008). In research of this type, pluralists are typically seeking to demonstrate that the regulation of employer behaviour can generate *unforeseen* positive consequences. These consequences, moreover, may become most apparent in the medium to longer term and be visible at the level of the national business system rather than the individual firm. The pluralist criterion of business performance operates at a wider scale than that employed by unitary writers researching the impact of HRM on company profitability. The latter are seeking to identify practices that can have immediate benefit to individual employers, while the former accept that individual firms may have to accept constraint (and higher costs) in order to secure longer-term, collective gains.

Even while the business performance standard has become habitual within pluralist research, however, it has been subject to critique and a competing criterion for evaluation advanced in its place. This has its origins in business ethics and is sometimes labelled the 'social justice case' for progressive IR, to distinguish it from the 'business case'. It has featured particularly strongly in pluralist commentary on the themes of equality and diversity (Dickens 2005; Noon 2007). The essence of this position is that there is a categorical imperative to respect the rights of workers, not only to form unions and engage in collective bargaining but also to be treated with dignity and respect and to receive minimum labour standards, including equal treatment. Precisely because the imperative is categorical, considerations of employer utility, the contribution to business performance that may ensue

from such respect and treatment, are at best secondary. The use of this standard of evaluation is seen at its clearest beyond the UK in the recent literature on labour rights as human rights (Compa 2004; Gross 2010; 2012). In this trenchant restatement of pluralist values, freedom of association, and its associated rights, is advanced as an absolute principle that must be respected regardless of the consequences for business. ~~The line of evaluation initiated by Freeman and Medoff has used~~ Whereas the use of business performance as an evaluative criterion relies upon neo-liberalism's own standard in assessing pluralist institutions. ~~business performance within market environments.~~ The advocates of labour rights and the social justice standard are less willing to appease neo-liberalism or submit to its hegemony. Their adoption of a categorical standard for assessing the employment relationship is indicative of a more assertive, perhaps militant, pluralist position coming to the fore.

## Critique

Critical reflection on other traditions has not been a pronounced feature of pluralism though at certain points critique has ~~been prominent~~ come to the fore. In its classic phase, the primary object of critique of UK pluralists was the work of radical industrial relations scholars further to the left (Flanders 1970). This line of criticism continues to be followed today, with pluralists mobilizing a recurrent set of arguments against the claims and assumptions of the radical or critical frame of reference. One such argument relates to the imputed interests of workers, with pluralists claiming that critical writers consistently miss-specify worker interests. On the one hand, pluralists have claimed that critical writers exaggerate the degree of exploitation to which workers are exposed in capitalist societies and their interest in overturning the existing order (Ackers 2014). On the other hand, pluralists have identified the strong preference of many workers for existing employment relationships and for institutions, such as moderate trade unionism and labour-management partnership, of which critical writers tend to disapprove (Bryson and Freeman 2007; Johnstone 2015). Much of this critique

is grounded in careful empirical analysis: the rebuttal of claims about workers' imputed interests through survey evidence of what workers actually say and do.

A second line of attack has concerned worker agency and the tendency for critical writers to identify worker resistance to capital as the primary motor driving the development of employment relations. In the classic period pluralists evinced scepticism about the radical potential of rank-and-file movements, whilst today they are often sceptical with regard to critical prescriptions for mobilising resistance, such as aggressive organizing campaigns and union-community coalitions, identifying their limited scope and impact (~~Freeman 2005;~~ [Ackers 2015](#); Gospel 2005). Pluralists also tend to suggest that critical writers have wrongly ascribed meaning to worker resistance. Thus, for Ackers (2014), the workplace militancy of the postwar era amounted to sectional and instrumental behaviour on behalf of strongly-organized, largely male groups of workers and emphatically did not represent a staging post in the creation of a class conscious proletariat as many critical scholars at the time believed. For pluralists, the idea of class conflict escalating to some kind of revolutionary denouement has always been implausible (~~Crouch 1982~~).

A final attack on the critical frame has focused on the question of the amenability of capitalist economies to reform. Flanders' (1970: 39) trenchant response to the New Left of the 1960s that 'pure and simple trade unionism... [has] gradually transformed society' is a classic statement of this position. A similar defence of reformist institutions is made by pluralists today; most notably in empirical demonstration of the gains that can accrue to workers and to unions from labour-management partnership (Kochan et al. 2009; Samuel 2014). The defining proposition of the pluralist frame of reference continues to be that institutions matter and can be created and reformed to civilize the economic order. The response of pluralists to claims by critical writers that the dynamics of capitalism or of processes integral to it, such as globalization, financialization and austerity, are leading to a

relentless degradation of work is to argue that these forces are not ineluctable and can be moderated through effective regulation. Institution-building not mere resistance is the path to a better future.

While fire was targeted primarily at the critical frame in the classical period, today it is directed equally at the unitary frame of reference. This change in orientation became visible in the 1980s in the pluralist response to the emergence of HRM. The claim that HRM constituted a distinctive and novel approach to workforce management prompted a deeply sceptical response from many pluralist scholars, which typically took the form of an empirical debunking of unitary claims. Using survey and case methodologies, pluralists took issue with the upbeat account of workplace change within the unitary literature on HRM. It was pointed out that there were at best ‘fragments of HRM’ in UK workplaces (Sisson 1993) and that most employers had not embarked on a progressive reconstruction of the employment relationship. On the contrary, it was further noted that in workplaces where unions were absent and employers had a relatively free hand to implement change, industrial relations often took the form of a ‘bleak house’ or ‘black hole’ characterized by a lack of progressive management (Guest and Conway 1999; Sisson 1993). Another line of attack was to note the frequent failure of those experiments with sophisticated HRM that did take place, as workers remained resolutely impervious to attempts at culture change designed to elicit their commitment (~~Clark 1995~~; Scott 1994). All of these lines of attack continue to be visible in more recent pluralist commentary on management fashions. Guest (2014), for instance, has questioned the strength and significance of the ‘engagement movement’ in UK workplaces and has noted both its failure to encompass questions of redistribution and its association with anti-unionism.

In explaining the failure of HRM and of later initiatives both to diffuse and to effect transformation in the workplace, pluralists have identified a lack of regulation, of beneficial

constraint, as the primary cause. Effectively, an institutional explanation of the limits of progressive management has been proposed. Thus, Sisson (1993: 207), when explaining the prevalence of ‘bleak house’ in non-union workplaces, notes the absence of a comprehensive framework of protective law and a decentralized system of collective bargaining that facilitated employer escape from union-based regulation. He also notes institutional features of British capitalism beyond IR narrowly conceived including, ‘the relative lack of education and training of British managers; the domination of the finance function and its modes of thinking; business strategies and structures which put the emphasis on ‘numbers-driven’ rather than ‘issue-driven’ planning; patterns of financing which seem almost designed to restrict investment; and the ease with which companies are subject to takeover by predatory conglomerates concerned primarily with financial engineering rather than making things or providing services’. This line of critique has also continued into the present. In a powerful attack on the unitary tradition, Thompson (2011) has stated that the financialization of the global economy and the prevalence of a ‘regime of accumulation’ in which short-term financial imperatives dominate, have rendered its call for an employer-led reform of the workplace implausible. ‘In liberal market economies dominated by shareholder value logic’, he observes, ‘there is no realistic path to internal reform of HRM. It will only behave differently if it is compelled by external regulation of employment systems to do so’ (2011: 364; see also Dickens 1999).

### **Prescription**

Institution-building of two types, lies at the centre of contemporary pluralist prescription for employment relations. The first type concerns the creation or strengthening of institutions of employee voice that can provide upward pressure on employers to manage better. Pluralists ~~in many countries~~ have contributed to the debate on union renewal and, as we have seen, have endorsed labour-management partnership and systems of gender democracy as means of



revitalizing union voice (Greene 2015; Kochan et al. 2009; Samuel 2014). The call for partnership is the latest expression of a long line of pluralist attempts to refashion union-based industrial relations on a more cooperative basis. Earlier instances include Flanders' (1964) recommendation of productivity bargaining in Britain in the 1960s and Walton and McKersie's (1991) near-contemporaneous advocacy of 'integrative bargaining' in the United States. Partnership has been an attractive proposition for pluralist writers because it appears to satisfy a number of the evaluative criteria specified above. Partnership agreements frequently contain provisions to more effectively regulate industrial conflict, such as new methods of arbitration, seek to enhance business performance through a 'productivity coalition', in which new methods of working are exchanged for management commitments to the workforce, and they typically incorporate a strong statement of the right of the union to exist and to represent its members. Critics have questioned whether beneficial outcomes are achieved in practice but for many pluralists labour-management partnership embodies their notion of good industrial relations.

While partnership is desirable for pluralists, it is increasingly accepted that it is not a sufficient response to the crisis of voice caused by trade union decline. In a notable shift from classic pluralism, which was often deeply sceptical about non-union participation or institutions such as joint consultation (Clegg 1960), contemporary pluralists have become much more accepting of these forms. Above, it was noted that much pluralist research on voice and participation focuses on statutory and employer-led systems, and is generally favourable in its conclusions. These methods can play a part in civilizing the workplace, it is argued, though it is also claimed that they will operate most effectively alongside a union-presence. Whereas once the dominant pluralist prescription for voice was for the single channel of union representation through collective bargaining, the main prescription now is for hybrid systems, in which direct and indirect, distributive and integrative, union and non-

union forms of representation and participation come together. Pluralists now endorse multiform employee voice (Ackers 2010; Heery 2011; Purcell 2014).

The other type of institution that contemporary pluralists want to build is the system of employment law and associated public policy that can regulate business activity from above, including from a European or global level through the policy of supra-state institutions like the European Union. Again, this is a departure from classic pluralism at least in Britain, which was characterized by a strong commitment to ‘collective laissez faire’ and the regulation of employment where possible through collective bargaining ~~(Kahn-Freund 1977)~~.

The clearest recent example is the UK’s National Minimum Wage, for which pluralists argued prior to its inception and of which they have provided broadly positive assessment since its introduction (Brown 2009; Metcalf 2008; Wadsworth 1993). To be sure, pluralists differ in their judgements of the adequacy of existing law and have provided competing assessments of the National Minimum Wage, with some seeking a radical strengthening of existing law (Simpson 2001). There is a broad pluralist consensus, however that legal regulation is necessary for the amelioration of a multitude of employment problems, including low pay, and the prescriptive writing of pluralist scholars tends to be directed at public policy makers (Dickens 2012a; Purcell and Hall 2012). The latest iteration of this work has focused on the implementation of law and the need for effective mechanisms to ensure that rights conferred on workers are respected by their employers. This has led to calls to supplement the mechanism of individual enforcement of rights through Employment Tribunals with expanded use of employer licensing, inspection, procurement, and the imposition of positive duties on employers to respect and act in accordance with the law (Dickens 2012b). Much of this prescription has focused on equality law. While it is common for pluralists to advocate the strengthening of employment law it is comparatively rare for them to regard legal regulation as sufficient for the task of balancing worker and employer

interests. Contemporary pluralists argue that law is best complemented by collective bargaining and have demonstrated that rights are more effectively implemented where unions are present (Brown et al. 2000; Colling 2012; Dickens 2012a). Just as pluralists now advocate hybrid systems of worker representation, so they advocate hybrid systems of employment regulation (Heery 2011). For Dickens (1999: 16), a combination of regulatory mechanisms that are ‘complementary and mutually reinforcing’ are required to advance the cause of equality at work.

## **Conclusion**

Writing more than a decade ago, Ackers (2002) called for a ‘neo-pluralism’ within the field of Industrial Relations, one less preoccupied with the trade union movement and that was receptive to communitarian principles and ethics. It is the argument of this article that a new pluralism has emerged in British IR though one that differs somewhat from the prescription offered by Ackers, particularly in the continuance of a central interest in trade unionism. The defining feature of the changes in pluralist thinking that have been logged in the pages above is an adaptation to neo-liberal hegemony in both the realm of ideas and in much public policy. This adaptation can be seen in several features of contemporary pluralism.

First, there has been a shift in the pluralist research agenda to a focus on problems for labour that arise both from market failure and from the irresponsible exercise of management prerogative. The economic and social disorder that has increasingly preoccupied pluralist scholars is generated from above by political and corporate elites not from below by over-mighty trade unions. Second, forms of explanation have changed with a falling away of belief in the relatively benign consequences of economic development in favour of more pessimistic accounts of the contextual forces that shape employment relations. Drawing upon the varieties of capitalism literature or the concept of financialization, pluralists have identified

potent structures that inhibit the development of good industrial relations. Third, the standards that pluralists have used to evaluate the employment relationship have altered in two rather contradictory ways. On the one hand, there has been widespread espousal of the neo-liberal standard of business performance as a yardstick to judge everything from trade unionism to employment law, while on the other a social justice standard has been advanced, most notably in the literature on gender equality and labour-rights-as-human-rights. Fourth, the targeting of pluralist critique has changed direction. Attacks on critical writers to the left continue but to these have been added more regular critique of the rising unitary frame, which can be seen in ~~critical~~-pluralist literature on HRM, employee engagement and other themes in the unitary canon. Fifth, there has been a major change in the prescriptions of pluralist writers. The traditional UK emphasis on voluntarism and for the creation of a self-sufficient industrial relations sub-system, insulated from the political sphere, has largely been abandoned. The public sociology of today's pluralists is directed at the state and typically calls for the more effective legal regulation of the employment relationship. In most cases, though, the embrace of legal intervention is not absolute and it is common for pluralists to make the case for hybrid systems, in which collective bargaining is married to and reinforces the impact of law. Espousal of hybrid systems can also be seen in contemporary pluralist work on the representation of worker interests, in which backing for the single channel of representation through trade unions has given way to support for a multiform system in which unions work alongside other representative bodies created by the state, by employers, or that have emerged from wider civil society. Hybrid systems of representation and regulation have been advocated with particular force by pluralists committed to the issue of equality and inclusion.

This combination of responses to neo-liberalism arguably contains both accommodative and resistive elements. The former can be seen in pluralist acceptance of the

business performance standard and in recognition that the old, collective system of industrial relations, based on trade unions, has been irretrievably compromised. New forms of worker voice and new methods of regulation, which have emerged in the context of union decline, have been accepted by pluralists. The latter can be seen in the sharper tone of critique that now pervades pluralist writing, in proposals to shore-up forms of collective voice and regulation, and in attacks on mainstream management writing and its unitary assumptions. Industrial Relations pluralism has become a more radical body of thought as the intellectual and policy context by which it has surrounded has moved to the right. A tradition that once appeared safe, cautious and married to elites has moved towards the critical pole as the global achievements of social democracy have been torn and frayed. Although the essentials of pluralist analysis have remained in place they have come to appear increasingly radical as the world has altered around them.

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